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## **WORK AND LEARNING**

### **The Role of Practice in Training for Laundry Work**

*Palle Rasmussen*

This article<sup>1</sup> deals with the interaction between training and work in vocationally oriented adult education. I present results from an analysis of a training course for laundry workers, and I focus on different ways in which work and the process of production can be present in the educational process.

#### **The educational relevance of work**

The breakthrough of industrial capitalism meant that a contradictory relationship between wage labour and education was institutionalised. Work requires knowledge and qualifications, and this comprises an important part of the objective of education in modern societies. At the same time work is a vital educational force in itself: learning the norms that prevail in working life is an important part of socialisation for adult life, and continuous participation in working life is an important prerequisite for attaining respect (and self-respect) as an adult in society. On the other hand wage labour is the object of forces that undermine its educational content: the demand for profit leads to constant division into sub-tasks, limitation of the qualification content of the individual task and stepping up of the pace of work.

Social and pedagogical thinking has always addressed this problem, considering ways to create coherence between wage labour and education and training.

A social scientist who addressed this problem at an early stage was Karl Marx. In the first volume of "Capital" he analyses the development from craft production over manufacturing to large-scale industry (Marx 1976). For Marx the most important result of this development was the de-qualification of the work force. Almost no skills were necessary to perform the simple, split-up work operations in large-scale industry; they could also be carried out by children. This meant that to a large extent employers no longer needed to train their workers. On the other hand, at the societal level it became increasingly vital to ensure that the working population received a basic education. For this reason the factory legislation that was gradually introduced in Great Britain from the middle of the 19th century also required that employers should educate the children that were used as labour. Not only did Marx see this as an improvement of the welfare of the working class, he also regarded the linking of education and work as a fruitful educational principle (Karras 1972). Through the "polytechnic" school, individuals could develop all-round and theoretically based technological competence which would make a constructive contribution to societal production but could not be learned in the industrial workplace. For Marx this connection between work and education was a necessary

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consequence of the capitalist development of production. However, it could only be really achieved in another type of society.

The idea of polytechnical education was an important source of inspiration for the educational systems of the East European socialist countries, but experience from this is outside the scope of this article.

Marx expected that the creative elements which were contained in craftsmanship and transferred by the apprenticeship system would largely disappear. While this has generally been the tendency in the industrial sector, a considerable element of craftsmanship remains and on-the-job training is still important. Simultaneously new forms of work have appeared in the service sector and in the professions. This has created new awareness concerning competence in work and the transfer of this competence by means of on-the-job training. And it has contributed to making the concept of tacit knowledge an important element in modern theories of learning. By tacit knowledge is meant non-formalised competence to evaluate tasks, to select from a repertoire of tools and solutions, and to correct strategies in relation to unexpected problems. This competence is based on knowledge which is tacit in the sense that others are not able to access it in an explicitly verbal form. It is experience-based knowledge acquired thorough practice at work. Although the competent worker may be able partially to explain why s/he has performed a task in a certain way, this will be an attempt at a verbal reconstruction of a process that in practice took place quickly and intuitively (Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1989).

The implication of this approach is that high-quality work competence is not ensured by means of formalised school education, but rather through participation and on-the-job training in working life. Leave and Wenger (1991) employ the concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" to characterise the learning situation where new members are gradually included in the community of practice in a certain occupation or other organised activity. Whereas the new members have a legitimate place in the community of practice, at the start they do not have the same obligations as full members with regard to the work. Apprentices may observe, imitate, ask questions and assist. In this way they not only learn work operations and practical reflection; they are also socialised into the culture surrounding work.

Where Marx pointed to theoretical instruction in school as a necessary supplement to (but closely linked with) industrial work, modern theories of learning point to the possibilities for developing competence and the training inherent in the work itself. The training course for laundry work, which I discuss in this article, draws on both of these connections between work and learning as it aims at both all-round learning in the practical training period and at linking theoretical instruction closely to work functions in the laundry. In this way the training course in laundry work is a good example of the possibilities and limitations of work-related learning for adults.

### **A training course for laundry work**

The training course for laundry assistants is a training programme under the Danish system of Adult Vocational Training (AMU). While most courses within this system are short and specialised, the training course for laundry work is a continuous course lasting 18 months and aiming at all-round competence. The first course was held in the Autumn of 1992; four classes with a total of about 60 laundry assistants have completed the programme up to now.

This article is based on an evaluation of a single class of 16 participants (Andersen et.al. 1996). The reason for focusing on a single class was to be able to look more closely at the interconnections between pedagogy and development of competence. The method employed was mainly semi-structured interviewed with course participants (twice during the course) and with teachers and representatives of the companies from which the participants came.

The course was established by the in-service training committee of the laundry industry, which is a body containing representatives of both employers' and employees' organisations.

It was our impression that the objective of the training committee in establishing this long-cycle training course was to prepare laundry employees for on-going reorganisation processes. Low wages and swift changeover of personnel have been traditional features of the laundry industry, and despite the rapid technological development of the laundries, many companies have only been marginally aware of matters concerning work organisation and environment.

We have met with many formulations of the objectives of the course when talking to participants, administrators, the course teachers and the education officers in the companies. For example as follows: raising the quality of the job; upgrading; increasing flexibility; increasing mobility, including further training; keeping staff; counteracting traditional thinking; limiting problems of the working environment; putting a brake on changeover of personnel; middle-manager training.

Several of these objectives also contain an altered conception of the role of training. Previously, training was intended to qualify employees to use new technology; now it should also enable them to become part of a more flexible work organisation with broader job functions. The training course may thus be seen as an attempt at innovation in the industry by investing in training for a wide group of employees. In a broader perspective, the course may be viewed as an attempt to improve the status of the laundry sector in the labour market.

The basic principles of the training course for laundry assistants are:

- It is a sandwich course with regular alteration between training in the laundry and instruction at the adult vocational training centre
- It seeks to establish holistic, functional cohesion between the different areas of

knowledge and skills in the course: from the start these are linked on the basis of a practical application perspective.

As mentioned above, the course takes 18 months. Just over a quarter of this time is spent on instruction at school spread over 5 periods of full-time teaching. The subjects studied during the school periods are a basic course, laundry techniques, logistics, technology and maintenance and administration and economy. The rest of the course consists of practical training in the companies at which the participants are employed.

The course model aims to provide the participants with both general and specific qualifications. The holistically oriented teaching should contribute to personal development while providing the participant with an understanding of the company as a whole. The assessment of the class we investigated was that both of these objectives had been fulfilled to a very high degree.

As the participants are adults who are already employed at the companies the practical training periods can, unlike the training of young apprentices, be based on a considerable foundation of experience. Up to now the participants who have been recruited to the laundry assistant training course differ on some points from the general picture of employees in the laundry industry. They are younger and the number of men is greater than in the line of industry as a whole. There are many indications that the employees who are recruited for the course are already reasonably well educated and have reasonable flexibility in their jobs, i.e. a certain possibility for organising and making priorities regarding their work themselves.

### **Practical training and schooling**

The laundry assistant training course is a sandwich course which alternates between practise periods of work and practical training in the company, and school periods of teaching at the adult vocational training centre.

The curricular framework lays down that there should be coherence between the content of the teaching during the school periods and the content of the practical training. In the case of the practical training periods this means that during the course the participants should try to carry out all of the job functions in the laundry; this should take place in a specified order corresponding to the content of the theoretical instruction.

How did the participants think that the practical training period functioned? Their reactions were by no means the same; there were in fact three separate groups who experienced the practical period in different ways. The first group (of 6) experienced it as clear, planned training where the participant and the company together made sure that the person in question was trained in the various work functions. Some of these participants said that they had made a plan for the training period together with the company. The second group (of 6) either experienced that they were placed quite arbitrarily or that they worked in the same place for

the whole time (that is to say the place where they had been before commencing the training course). There was no planned training for the third group (of 4) either, but the participants themselves made sure that they circulated between the different work functions in the company.

Thus the majority of participants did not think that the company had a plan for or supervision of the participant being trained in different work functions. The primary role of the company was signing the participant's schedule for the training period. These companies seemed to have little commitment to the training of their employees.

But how did the companies view the training period? We interviewed 11 managers with responsibility for training none of whom felt that the practical training period had been directly unsatisfactory. One manager felt that the practical training period had not gone so well but that this was because the company had sent the wrong person on the course.

Most of the companies said that the practical training period had been planned even though some of the companies had not had the plan in writing. Some stated that at peak load times the participants had been moved to production that was short staffed.

There was a clear difference between the assessments of the managers and the staff as to the success of the practical training periods. The staff was often less satisfied irrespective of whether a written plan had existed. As far as we can see these differences are due to the participants having expected the companies to be more engaged and having expected to be told the functions they would have to carry out during their practical training, while management had regarded it as the participants' own task to ensure relevant trying out of work functions. The management had, moreover, not noticed that the participants had perhaps not always circulated among the different job functions in the company as they should have.

A third point of view is that of the education officers who manage the training course. How do they view these problems in the practical training? The leader of the adult vocational training centre responsible for the day-to-day administration of the course pointed out that one of the specialist teachers conducted a certain degree of supervision of the companies. It was his job to evaluate, on the basis of the written training period schedules, whether the participants had had a varied and relevant training period and, if necessary, he should contact the company in question. However, the specialist teacher himself had a rather different view of the matter. He stated that it was only when the first class commenced the course that he had visited the laundries to talk to them. He had not visited companies of the second class. He agreed that there were problems involved with the practical training periods. At public laundries these periods were reasonably satisfactory as it was usually possible to take a person out of production to try something new. This could not always be done at private laundries. On the basis of the schedules, it was his assessment that the companies were not so interested in the

course and that they were not really aware of the fact that they themselves constituted at least 50% of the training course.

The leader of the school, however, pointed out that the question also had to be seen from the companies' perspective. There might be reasons as to why a participant could not be moved around. If too much pressure were put on the companies concerning this question, it might be difficult to maintain their positive cooperation.

In my view, it is still a serious problem that while the training course formally ensures a link between practical training period and school period, there is no intervention when companies do not observe their side of the contract. This means that participants who are not satisfied with conditions during their practical training period are largely forced to do something about the situation themselves. It is obvious that most of them would be reluctant to do anything that could damage their relations with their employers. Nevertheless, some of the participants we spoke to did actually discuss the problem with their company.

It is not the companies alone that are responsible for the link between the school periods and the practical training periods. The schools and teachers should take an interest in relating the teaching to what takes place during practical training. However, both teachers and participants agreed that this did not occur in most cases. Only one specialist teacher paid any attention to the training period in his teaching. Some of the other teachers did not know the overall plan for the course and were thus not aware that it was the intention that the practise and the schooling should comprise a whole. Thus a discrepancy existed between the course objective and information communicated to these teachers.

### **Production as the frame of reference for learning**

The curricular framework for the laundry assistant training course requires that during the whole 18 month course the school periods should combine practical and theoretical learning in a holistic manner. This means that even theoretical teaching must be oriented towards the production processes and work functions that the practical teaching is oriented towards. This demand is, inter alia, based on the assessment that development in working life will be away from narrow specialisation and towards more all-round job functions. On the other hand, the curriculum also makes other demands regarding the school period. It should provide the qualification for further education and should contribute to the participants' personal development and their understanding of society.

Teaching during the school periods is composed of already existing adult vocational training courses: partly courses in laundry techniques developed within the industry, and partly courses with a more general content. It is not easy to create coherence between these elements. Each course has its own syllabus and as a rule a teaching tradition associated with a certain subject area.

It is one of the basic ideas of the training course that the first school period (basic training) should establish coherence across the lines of the different subjects and areas of competence, and that this coherence should be followed up throughout the whole training course. The coherence across subject lines is enhanced by linking the subjects to their common application perspective that comprises the company and the laundry industry as a whole. In addition forms of teaching (such as project work in groups) that facilitate integration between the different subjects are widely used.

In the first school period the teaching was structured around project work that dealt with the laundry as a whole. Working in three groups the participants built up a simulated laundry and considered hardware, staff, design, washing programmes and the like. The laundry itself was constructed in the form of toy-like models. These models also had the function that the participants could return to them later when going into more depth in the individual areas. This has also been the case to a certain extent: for example, the storage component was re-evaluated and changed in connection with a later school period.

Thus orienting the teaching towards the laundry industry was a principle that was emphasised in the general organisation of the course and during the first school periods. On the other hand, a number of the teachers who taught during later school periods either did not follow the principle or did so to a limited extent only. For instance, a computer science teacher stated that his was a standard course the content of which was not related to specific subjects or industries. The same teacher also pointed out that the teachers lacked the qualifications for relating their teaching to this line of industry; they knew too little about how work in a laundry was organised and the part played by their own subjects in production.

All the participants expressed satisfaction with their model laundry work during the basic course. In my view there were three reasons for this; firstly, the creativity and clarity involved in working with the models; secondly, the group work which allowed them to get into depth and to discuss their experience; and thirdly, the strong links to the laundry sector. The model laundries made it possible to gain an interim overview of work areas and functions in a laundry and thus also of the subject areas in the training course.

Thus the participants stressed that the teaching they received during the course should be linked to conditions within the laundry sector. This is a pedagogical principle signalled by the training course itself and one that also appeals to the participants. They have, after all, been working in the industry for an average of 3-4 years and know a great deal about the conditions and work at the companies. The principle of linking the teaching to conditions within the laundry sector provides the participants with a sure starting point, a foothold during the school periods. For these reasons the continuous connection with the laundry sector was crucial to the participants' evaluation of the school periods and of the teachers.



On this background, it is not surprising that most of the criticism that the participants levelled at some of the teachers and subjects pointed to a lack of connection with the laundry industry. However, upon closer examination the criticism contained several aspects. One type of criticism was that the subject did not provide knowledge that was directly applicable to work in the company. A somewhat different type of criticism was that in the teaching material and examples had been used from other lines of industry even though examples from the laundry industry could have been used just as well: for example that stock control was exemplified with screws and nuts instead of with washing. Finally, there was a type of criticism that said that while the subject was interesting and good to know about, they still missed some connection with the laundry sector. Several participants had this criticism of the teaching of computing. It was clear that the teaching of computing had provided these participants with knowledge and an overview that they had been lacking, even though they may not have used computers in their specific work functions. It was difficult for them to unite this with their principle that the teaching should be closely linked to the laundry sector.

Thus there was a strong, widespread wish among participants that the teaching should be firmly based in conditions within the laundry sector. This base would motivate participants and give them a firm foothold during school periods. However, in my opinion the expectations of close, continuous association with the line of industry seemed also to be an inappropriate defence mechanism vis à vis material that participants would find more useful generally. This indicates that the training course and the teachers, on the one hand, should ensure more consistent use of material and examples from the laundry area where it is both relevant and possible. On the other hand the participants should be clearly told that some of the material will be more general in nature and that while it cannot be so closely linked to the laundry area, it will provide important background knowledge.

### **Work experience and cooperative learning**

The practical training in the companies and basing the school periods on a holistic understanding of the work process were planned forms of coherence between work and training. But the evaluation revealed that the training course also contained a third form, namely the participants' mutual cooperation which also meant discussing their experience.

The fact that the participants take part in the same class for one and a half years, meeting regularly during the school periods, distinguishes the long-cycle training course from the ordinary adult vocational training courses. The participants do not have to spend time and effort in getting to know new people at the beginning of every course. Discussions and situations are remembered from the one school period to the next, enabling the class to build up common experience. On the other hand, it is clear that the longer contact involves the risk of conflicts becoming worse. It is not possible just to say goodbye and thank you at the end of the individual course.

In the case of the class under investigation the long-term cooperation process did not merely function for the class as a whole, but also on the group level. Three groups which were formed during the first school period continued to function during later school periods to a greater or lesser degree. During the first part of the training course the groups made use of the model laundries they had constructed during the basic course. In at least one case they continued to work directly with the models.

All participants expressed their satisfaction with group work. As mentioned above they were particularly engaged in the work with the model laundries during the basic course which was of professional benefit as well as developing good cooperation in the groups. They were also satisfied with the group work performed during later school periods. Their reasons differed slightly: some participants emphasised that group work sums up the knowledge of the different participants while others stressed that group work allows everyone to participate.

The curricular framework for the laundry assistant training course contained neither comments nor guidelines regarding the long-term cooperation in the class, and the teachers did not formulate any special considerations concerning this question either. However, our conversations with the teachers showed that some of them had considered the function, strengths and weaknesses of the groups.

There can be no doubt that the long-term cooperation in the class and in the groups played a central role in learning and development of competence during the training course. By means of cooperation and discussions the participants could share knowledge with each other and could develop their understanding of the objective of the course and of their own work situation. In this way cooperation helped to integrate a differentiated group of participants who together were thus able to benefit more from the training course. The participants were also more aware of the meaning of this exchange of experience than were most of the teachers. This can, inter alia, be seen from the fact that several of the participants proposed that they should visit each others' places of work as part of the training course.

### **The limits of practice**

The training course for laundry assistants is based on a fundamentally sound idea and it seems that the participants gain a great deal from it. At the end of the course when we asked the participants what they thought were the most important things they had learned from the course, the answers clustered around three points. In the first place, the majority thought that the training course had given them good insight into the production process and work functions in a laundry and into the laundry industry as a whole. "It's nice to know what goes on", as one of them said. In the second place many of the participants thought that they had learnt to cooperate better and to enter into constructive dialogue with others. Finally, most of them also said that they had gained knowledge and skills within certain areas, computer science in particular. Thus the training course provides participants with technical, general and

personal qualifications.

However, the success of the training course as such does not mean that the planned forms of interaction between education and work were entirely successful. As I have described above, there were problems which especially involved the practical training; there were also problems involved in utilising the production process as a frame of reference for the school periods.

Even though the participants thought that they had achieved a good understanding of work functions in a laundry by means of the training course, only one of the participants said that this understanding had come about by means of practical training in the functions. And, as mentioned previously, most of the participants were of the opinion that their workplace had not planned the all-round training in the different work functions which was presupposed in the curricular framework. This may be seen as an expression of the fact that it is difficult for single companies in a market economy to implement planned and systematic training. The scope for training is limited by the fact that production must always be adjusted to the market and the demand for cost-effectiveness. And even though management might want to implement systematic training, unexpected orders, technical problems, problems of recruitment, illness and many other matters often mean that those who are being trained have to be sent back to their traditional functions.

Thus the learning process in the laundry assistant training course does not generally proceed according to Leave and Wenger's model for legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. Although participants are, to be sure, participants in the practice of production thus achieving considerable competence, the attempt to further develop this competence in a more all-round and reflexive form is limited by the specialisation and short-term problem-solving demanded if production is to show a profit. Some of the mechanisms pointed out by Marx are thus still features of working life.

As mentioned before the representatives of the employers were less aware of these problems and the training course leaders were reluctant to make demands concerning the efforts of the companies during the practical training period. This may be understood as an expression of the fact that practical training-based education and training is also subject to unequal distribution of power. By their control of production and employment the companies have power which it is difficult for public education systems challenge. And the companies' motives for participating in practical training education is not merely to provide thorough, all-round training. It is also, for example, to ensure that the staff are available for production and to recruit staff for leading work functions.

The principle of organising school periods on the basis of a holistic perspective of the work process in a laundry is basically sensible and there can be no doubt that it has contributed to

giving the participants all-round, reflexive competence. However, the principle is also accompanied by the problem that it focuses the participants' attention too much on the immediately recognisable reality of working life and contributes to creating defence mechanisms in relation to more general knowledge. It is also quite possible that some of this general knowledge will prove to be irrelevant to the laundry assistants' future work functions. However, nobody can say in advance what knowledge will be irrelevant. The development of reflexive competence presupposes a certain surplus of knowledge and skills that can be mobilised in new situations, and this surplus can only be worked up if the training course does not focus too narrowly on current job functions.

It is my assessment that an important part of the learning during the training course took place in a way that had not been foreseen by those who planned the course, namely through the long-term cooperation between the participants in the class and in group work. This cooperation meant that the participants could discuss experience from their places of work and job functions, and together could reflect on this experience and relate it to areas of knowledge and skill during the school periods. In this the course actually functioned as an all-round enhancement of the competencies that the participants had developed during their working lives.

At a more general level our study of the laundry assistant training course confirms that the connection of institutional education with practise and training in working life is a fruitful way of organizing vocational training for adults. The visible links to job functions contribute to overcoming the barriers of motivation which are often found among people with limited previous schooling. The possibilities for drawing on and discussing experiences from the work process provides the participants with a better basis for the acquisition of new knowledge. If conditions are favourable, the sandwiching of work-based and school-based training can create a reciprocity between theoretical and practical knowledge, which leads to a versatile and reflexive competence.

But although the connection to working life is important, it is no less important that the process of training is rooted in an independent institutional environment for teaching and learning. Working life itself leaves limited room for more independant forms of learning and reflection, because it has to fulfil demands for efficiency and profitability. In the educational institutions experiences may be voiced, discussed, and linked to systematic aquisition of knowledge. It is possible to experiment with alternative ways of organizing work and to pursue knowledge interests whose relevance to the world of work are not immediately obvious.

This kind of fruitful interconnection between work and education also demands a good organization of the course as a whole. The sandwich course should be based on clear frameworks and agreements, which schools as well as workplaces can trust in. But the

framework should be open and flexible. Rather than trying to direct and control teaching and the development of competence in detail, the framework should leave room for and support cooperative and experience-based learning.

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